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DE RUEHLB #1986/01 3551604
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 211604Z DEC 07
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0561
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 3081
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN PRIORITY 0999
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAHINGEN GE PRIORITY
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 1820
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO PRIORITY 2054
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 001986

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/20/2017

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PARM](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: A/S WELCH AND FRENCH CHARGE EXCHANGE
VIEWS ON NEXT STEPS

BEIRUT 00001986 001.2 OF 004

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires William Grant for Reasons: Section 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) During a visit to Beirut following the December 17 Lebanon Ministerial in Paris, NEA Assistant Secretary David Welch and Deputy Advisor to the President and National Security Advisor (DAPNSA) Elliot Abrams discussed Lebanon's continuing political crisis with French Charge d'Affaires Andre Parant on December 19. All agreed that the U.S. and France should do what was necessary to support the Siniora government, while at the same time avoiding giving the impression of having given up on the election. Parant viewed Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun as both a problem and a pretext for the opposition, and predicted that the election would occur when the Syrians decided the time was right. Parant also expressed concerns about UNIFIL security in the south and skepticism about the German border mission in the north. End summary.

2. (C) Visiting NEA Assistant Secretary David Welch and Deputy Advisor to the President and National Security Advisor (DAPNSA) Elliot Abrams met with French Charge d'Affaires Andre Parant at his Residence des Pins on December 19. Charge Bill Grant, Pol/Econ Chief, NEA Staff Assistant, and Remy Bouallegue (Parant's notetaker) also attended the meeting. A/S Welch explained to Parant that the purpose of his visit, the day after the French-hosted Ministerial on Lebanon in Paris, was to demonstrate U.S. support for March 14 and help overcome the perception that the U.S. and France were not working together on Lebanon. The Secretary had had good discussions with FM Bernard Kouchner in Paris, he said, and the two shared a strong understanding regarding their goals in Lebanon.

PREPARING FOR THE LONG HAUL

3. (C) The U.S. was now looking ahead to what it expected to be a prolonged crisis, A/S Welch continued, with three possible scenarios. The first, March 14 pursuing the election of a president with a half plus one majority, seemed

unlikely. The second, the preferred outcome, was that the majority and opposition would find a solution and elect Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman as a consensus president, the scenario that was currently in play.

Third, the status quo, with the Siniora government continuing to exercise the authority of the presidency, would continue.

14. (C) The U.S. was exploring possible tools to pressure the Syrians to allow the election to take place, A/S Welch said. DAPNSA Abrams added that the U.S. also would like to see the Europeans increase their pressure, but that it did not seem likely.

15. (C) Parant admitted that the Paris declaration on Lebanon was not as good as the French would have liked. Nevertheless, March 14 had told him that, although weak, it was a good beginning. He told A/S Welch and D/NSA Abrams that their visit was important. March 14 was "depressed" and March 8 was confident in its strength and ability to obstruct the election. The visit was helpful in changing this perception and boosting March 14's confidence.

16. (C) France had told March 14 it could count on French support, but should not rely exclusive on external support; it also needed to do its homework and develop a better communications strategy, especially to counter March 8's assertions that the opposition was making all the concessions. Majority leader Saad Hariri had assumed a low profile for fear of being attacked (Note: Saad has told us the same thing. End note.). March 14 needed both a short-term strategy to avoid appearing on the defensive, and a long-term strategy to help it win the 2009 parliamentary elections. March 14 leaders had met the night before and started to think about this, he said.

17. (C) Parant agreed with the three scenarios outlined by A/S

BEIRUT 00001986 002.2 OF 004

Welch, adding that he did not view December 31 (when the current legislative session ends) as a deadline for the election. If there is a political agreement, he said, the election can occur at any time. Not only did the constitution prescribe two methods for amendments, but the parties themselves were discussing ways to elect Sleiman that would not require an amendment, which France would accept even though it did not see them as constitutional. "We can't be more Lebanese than the Lebanese," he said.

18. (C) If Syria and the opposition believe they've obtained the maximum concessions possible, they may agree to a compromise, Parant continued, especially if March 14 exhibits a little more flexibility. However, he did not believe there would be an election on December 22 (the next scheduled parliamentary session), and probably not before the end of they year.

SUPPORTING THE SINIORA GOVERNMENT

19. (C) It was therefore important that the government demonstrate that, although it wanted an election and had made concessions, it also was prepared to take steps to govern, albeit without provocation. It was important, Parant stressed, that the Siniora government avoid giving the opposition any pretext to criticize it, but at the same time it needed to show it was governing, i.e., by appointing a minister to replace assassinated Industry Minister Pierre Gemayel and resuming Council of Minister meetings. March 14 needed to communicate to explain why it was taking these actions, explaining that it had tried everything possible to hold the election, but in the meantime it could not leave the country without leadership.

110. (C) A/S Welch suggested that the U.S. and France should work on a common agenda of discourse with the Siniora

government, aimed at boosting GOL institutions. Defending the Siniora government against attacks that the Christians were not properly represented without a president was key. Parant, noting that this was Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun's argument, agreed that the government should immediately replace Gemayel, and also appoint a minister to replace resigned opposition minister Yaacoub Sarraf. Another possibility was to expand the current government by ten, adding five Christians and five Muslims.

¶11. (C) DAPNSA Abrams suggested that the Siniora government also needed to take economic steps. Parant agreed, adding that an assessment should be done of the debt situation. France, he said, would sign a Euro 375 million budget support agreement in January, to be disbursed in three tranches: Euro 155 as soon as the end of January, with a second tranche in the second half of 2008. A/S Welch noted that Saad was pressing for a big deposit from Saudi Arabia.

THE AOUN FACTOR

¶12. (C) Parant agreed that Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader Michel Aoun, whom he planned to see the next day, was a real problem for Hizballah. The FPM provided Christian cover for the Shia group, as well as a pretext for Hizballah to extract more concessions from the opposition. But, Parant argued, Hizballah also had the capacity to tell Aoun that, while it supported him, it was time to make a deal on the presidency.

¶13. (C) We need to understand to what extent Aoun is a real problem and to what extent he is only a pretext for Hizballah, Parant said. DAPNSA Abrams agreed that Aoun had a useful purpose, noting that at the Paris ministerial, whenever Syria or Iran was blamed, Arab League SYG Amr Moussa would protest, fingering Aoun as the real culprit. Parant cautioned that it was not easy to pressure Aoun, who loved to appear as a martyr. If you victimize him, he'll use it to increase his own importance. Unfortunately, Parant said, France did not have the tools at its disposal to impose sanctions like the U.S.

¶13. (C) Aoun's popularity had decreased in the past year,

BEIRUT 00001986 003.2 OF 004

Parant continued (i.e., following his 2006 MOU with Hizballah), but he was still important, and Saad's refusal to deal him Aoun was "really childish." The Christians were divided between Aoun and Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea.

Aounists have concluded that Aoun will not become president, and Aoun himself is prepared to accept that, Parant said, but he continues to hope that if the election is delayed until the 2009 parliamentary elections, he will have an opportunity then. March 14 should work on his supporters, Parant suggested, who will be eager to jump ship if it appears his chances are sinking, while the U.S. should target its sanctions at his immediate circle.

OPPOSITION SEATS IN CABINET

¶14. (C) Parant, confirming that Saad talked to Hizballah through MP Mohamad Raad, argued that Hizballah should be in the next cabinet, perhaps with Salloukh staying on as Foreign Minister. It is better that Hizballah be in the government than outside criticizing it, he explained.

¶15. (C) The real problem, he said, would be allocation of the "sovereign" ministries between the majority and the opposition. March 14 should keep the Ministries of Justice (because of the Special Tribunal) and Interior (for internal security purposes and election issues). March 8 would then get Finance and Foreign Affairs, with the President receiving Defense. But how to convince Saad to give up Finance, he asked? (Note: Saad has told us he learned from his father

long ago that he who pays has the control. He said he would give the portfolio to a weak minister, but retain effective control it himself. Finance is considered one of the four "sovereign" ministries, while Justice is sometimes considered the fifth. End note.)

SYRIANS IN NO HURRY TO SEE A PRESIDENT

¶16. (C) Parant said he sensed the Syrians had lost confidence in their ability to influence events in Lebanon and believed U.S. influence was now stronger than theirs. March 14's nomination of LAF Commander Michel Sleiman had caught them by surprise, and "there's nothing the Syrians hate more than being surprised," he said. The assassination of Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) General Francois al-Hajj was a clear message to Sleiman, Parant believed, adding that Saad had told him he spoke to Sleiman the day after the assassination, and Sleiman reportedly confided that he felt personally targeted.

¶17. (C) The Syrians are not in a hurry, Parant continued; they deal according to their agenda. When it is in their interests, there will be an election, he predicted. Sleiman doesn't need Syria's support to be president, he said, and is therefore less easy to manipulate, although of course he has lots of links to Syria. Unlike a Michel Edde, who needs Syria to make him king. Nor, Parant argued, would Sleiman be a puppet of Hizballah. Sleiman had told Parant that he knew Hizballah's capacity and would not attack it ("I'm not crazy!" he reportedly said), but at the same time would not be complacent. "I'm someone who can say no," Sleiman said to Parant.

TENUOUS UNIFIL, BORDER SECURITY

¶18. (C) Welch asked about the current risk to UNIFIL, where France has a large contingent of troops. Parant described it as high, adding that it could go higher, especially if there was a confrontation with Syria -- even a political one, he said. It was therefore important to engage in dialogue with Syria to decrease UNIFIL's exposure to risk. Parant did not believe the risk would come from Israel, nor from Hizballah, which had learned its lesson from the 2006 war and was busy reconstituting its capacity and restoring its bruised public image. Hizballah would want to keep its capacity for important causes, Parant argued, and not waste them on an operation that could provoke major Israeli reaction.

¶19. (C) However, Parant did not rule out the possibility of a

BEIRUT 00001986 004.2 OF 004

Palestinian group, possibly manipulated by Hizballah or operating with Hizballah's consent, attacking UNIFIL. To avoid such a scenario, Parant confirmed that France regularly sends messages to Hizballah not to touch UNIFIL or France will hold Hizballah responsible.

¶20. (C) Parant was not optimistic about the utility of the German border pilot project. Without the political willingness to control the border from both sides, Parant did not think France could provide much assistance. Furthermore, he said, PM Siniora was right: how can we believe the Syrians are serious when the PFLP-GC is on their border?

¶21. (U) A/S Welch has not cleared this cable.
GRANT